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A Place to Be Heard

THE GREAT AMERICAN NEWSPAPER

The Rise and Fall of the Village Voice.
By Kevin Michael McAuliffe.
Illustrated. 486 pp. New York:
Charles Scribner's Sons. $14.95.

By THOMAS POWERS

WRITERS are a hardy breed. They can survive neglect, contempt, cold-water walk-ups, paralyzing blocks, the poverty of Grub Street, wrong-headed reviews, the blue pencils of editors, rejection, the bleak self-doubt that comes at 3 o'clock in the morning — just about anything, in short, except the lack of a place to publish their work. That they must have, and that is what an astonishing number of them were given when Dan Wolf and Edwin Fancher started the Village Voice in the fall of 1955.

The paper's debut was inauspicious; only 2,500 copies of the first issue were printed, and circulation, at a nickel a copy, was limited to a narrow corner of lower Manhattan. Thereafter it lost money at a slow but steady rate for years, and it was not until 1962 that Voice writers got their first checks — for $5 an article. But the moment was ripe all the same, as Kevin McAuliffe amply — and I do mean amply — shows in his fine and lively history of the Village Voice. He quotes from scores of Voice writers, tracks their paths through American cultural and political life literally year by year, untangles (insofar as the human mind *can* untangle such Gordian complexity) every quarrel, feud and spat that divided Voice people over the years.

But "The Great American Newspaper" is not a petty book. Mr. McAuliffe thinks the Voice came along at a uniquely opportune moment in American history, and he pretty much proves his point. A gaping hole existed in American intellectual life in 1955, bounded on one side by Time-Life's celebrants of the American Century, and on the other by the harried liberals of The Nation and The New Republic. The Voice tapped something new and unsuspected on the American scene, an unruly strain of cultural ferment and political discontent that Norman Mailer described in a 1956 column for the paper when he said, "I feel the hints, the clues, the whisper of a new time coming."

It was a fine column, filled with Mailer's customary prescience and vitriol, and it was also his last, a parting shot after a year of argument and smoldering resentment typical of the extravagant passions the Voice elicited from writers and readers alike. It was the peculiar genius of Dan Wolf to see that the vitality of the Voice depended on giving everyone his head so long as he could write, had something on his mind and did not insist on making a living. The result was a paper without apparent editorial direction but a capacity for endless surprise. Radicals and conservatives ran side by side, and sometimes head-on, and then were raked over a week or two later in the letters column, as disgusted readers announced regularly that the Voice had now, at last, clearly and irrevocably, sold out to the establishment.

The Voice was generally taken, by all but its readers, to be vaguely "radical" or "leftist," but in fact it had no distinct political coloration, unless it was something on the order of anarcho-conservatism or democratic fundamentalism or social-libertarianism. The Voice position, as it emerged in practice over the years until Messrs. Wolf and Fancher sold the paper in January 1970, has no short name. It was reformist in local politics, opposed to the war in Vietnam, sympathetic to the civil-rights movement, impatient with the lumpen Marxism-Leninism of the New Left, sick and tired of white liberal guilt feelings that excused street crime as a form of symbolic rebellion by The Poor and The Oppressed. But that puts too much emphasis on politics, and neglects the Voice practice of routinely publishing contrary views. In fact, the Voice gave space to just about everything that seriously caught the attention or exercised the emotions of Americans during a period in which Americans seemed to be rediscovering the entire world.

This openness made the paper interesting to read. Eventually 150,000 people were buying it regularly — not a huge number by the standards of Madison Avenue, accustomed to the car and toothpaste and beer-buying millions who read Time, Life and the rest of the slick-paper weeklies. But to advertisers it was a strategically situated, generally affluent 150,000, who went to the movies, rented apartments, bought waterbeds and stereos and other consumer durables, and the Voice therefore offered a modestly priced route to a great deal of buying power. In short, the Voice began to sell ads and make money, quite a lot of money, more than a quarter of a million dollars in profit in the fiscal year that ended in July 1969. Profit on this scale made the paper an attractive investment, and for a variety of reasons — personal weariness, other interests, concern over the paper's fate if one of them should die — Mr. Wolf and Mr. Fancher elected to sell control of the Voice for $3 million to Carter Burden, a young man with money, political ambitions and the face of a sad and sensitive child.

The writers at the Voice were not altogether happy about their new owner. Ambivalence about money and success had been characteristic of Voice people from

Thomas Powers has completed a book on Richard Helms and the Central Intelligence Agency.

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the beginning; a lot of them half believed that if the paper had *really* been any good it would have failed. They felt queer about working for somebody who was so clearly on The Other Side, and darkly suspected that Mr. Burden planned to use the Voice for self-promotion.

They need not have worried. It was apparently only money that was on Mr. Burden's mind when he bought the paper, and again when he sold it, in effect, to Clay Felker and New York magazine in June 1974. This made the Voice people unhappy again, especially after Mr. Felker fired Mr. Wolf and Mr. Fancher. By his own later admission, Mr. Felker did not understand the Voice. He liked and sought out good writing, but he did not altogether trust writers to come up with the sort of ideas that would sell magazines. Mr. Wolf gave writers their head; Mr. Felker reined them in, with the odd result that he often published the flimsiest work of the best writers. But the worst was yet to come. Less than three years later Mr. Felker spectacularly mismanaged his relationship to his own board of directors, and the company, including the Voice, was sold out from beneath him to Rupert Murdoch, the Australian press tycoon who had just bought The New York Post.

These events have been described in print before, but Mr. McAuliffe has a good deal that is new to report. He ends his history on a melancholy note, convinced that the Voice is spiritually dead, even if financially robust, now that Mr. Murdoch has finally succeeded in imposing his own editor. This conviction lends his book a certain symmetry, but the death of the Voice has been announced prematurely before. ■